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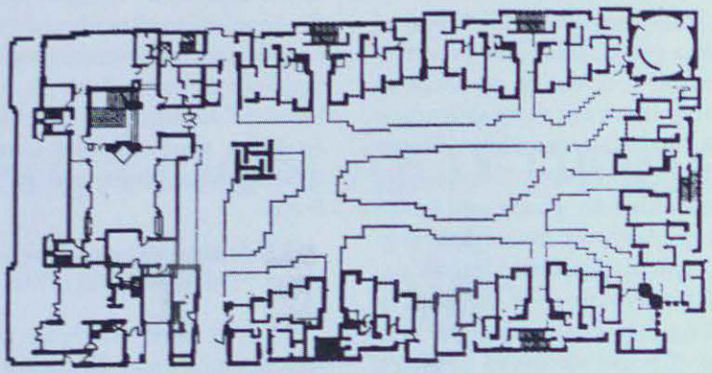


Massey College—Ground Floor Plan

A Critique of:

MASSEY COLLEGE, TORONTO

Reprinted from the October, 1963 issue of the ***Royal Architectural Institute of Canada Journal****. This review was subsequently republished in a slightly modified version under the title "Home for Scholars" in the November 28, 1963 issue of the* ***Manchester Guardian****.*

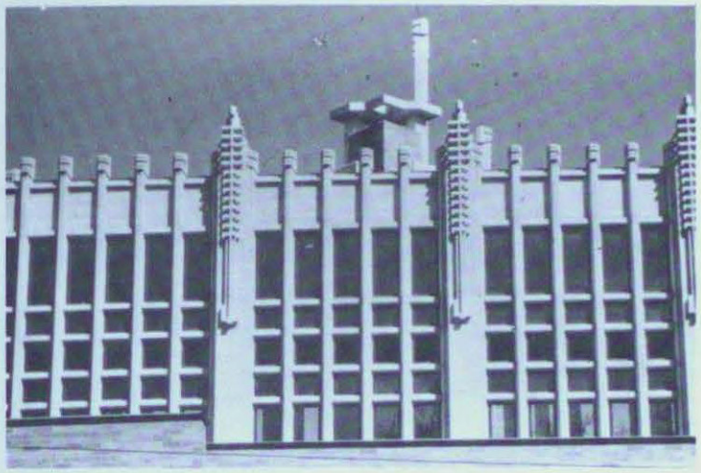
For members of the architectural profession, the main importance of Massey College lies in the fact that despite its obvious efficiency in plan, pleasantness of appearance and soundness of construction, it challenges with shameless vigour many of the basic architectural concepts which seem to constitute orthodoxy as expressed in the leading architectural magazines in Europe and the United States.

Consider, to begin with, the plan. According to the *avante-garde* theorists, such as Professor Llewelyn Davies and Reyner Banham, the worst thing any self-respecting architect can do is to accept either the client's program, or a traditional program, as the basis of his own design. Reyner Banham criticized Coventry Cathedral because, according to him, it kept too closely to the traditional arrangements of Anglican worship, whereas the whole liturgy should, in his view, have been reinterpreted in twentieth century terms to produce a twentieth century program. Professor Llewelyn Davies has been even more categorical in his attitude (although the uninspiring results of his attempts to apply his own theory in the new "Times" building may well have tempered his arrogance in this respect): "The client's brief is nearly always wrong, and a bad brief inevitably results in disastrous architecture." But in the competition for Massey College, the four contestants were presented with an extremely detailed brief by a group client (namely the trustees of the Massey Foundation) who had very definite ideas as to what was wanted; and the client not merely specified in detailed terms the physical facilities required, but stated the precise environmental character which was considered most suitable.

The nature of the amenities to be provided was prescribed in unequivocal detail, even to the extent of describing the character of the dining hall, common room and so on, and requiring, for example, that fireplaces should be provided in these communal rooms and in the resident Fellows' rooms. There is no doubt that the program was strongly influenced, if not directly inspired, by personal recollections of the type of community which was established at Oxford seven centuries ago and has flourished vigorously ever since, and it is clear that the trustees deliberately intended that the graciousness and dignity of the accomodations provided at Oxford in the middle ages should be found at Massey College.

For visitors familiar with Oxford, there is undoubtedly an aura of traditional collegiate life about the plan of this new building in Toronto. But interestingly enough, the plan is in no way based on that of an Oxford college, and is strikingly original both in the organization of the circulation and the planning of the various rooms. Nowhere, at Oxford, can one find anything comparable to the spatial configuration of the common room, with the dining hall so elegantly superimposed. In fact, if one analyses and compares, one finds that the only really similar feature is the common presence of an enclosed courtyard whereby all the rooms look onto an inner communal tranquility. Perhaps the *avant-garde* theorists would prefer to have seen an isolated refectory and dormitory blocks, although it is difficult to see how one can reject the contemporaneity of this courtyard plan except on the grounds that it corresponded also to the needs of scholars before the First Machine Age, and hence is no longer valid.

Let us now consider the appearance of the building, since it is in this respect that hostile critics of the design will find most cause for raillery, in that, in the name of Progress, they can easily take the architect to task for using forms reminiscent of both the Middle Ages and of Frank Lloyd Wright's architecture previous to 1914. There can be no doubt that the window and spandrel details, and the pinnacles, could justifiably be classified by archaeologists as neo-Gothic, and in this sense, they are curiously comparable to Barry and Pugin's facades for the Palace of Westminster. Moreover, such romantic associations with mediaeval prototypes can hardly be dismissed as fortuitous, even though the architect himself protests his complete ignorance of the history of architecture. Hence, one has the uneasy suspicion that this design is essentially a kind of scenery, and any architect visiting the building is inevitably reminded of the brilliant speech made by Robertson Davies, now Master of Massey College, when he addressed the RAIC in 1960, and proclaimed that "you are the designers of the scenery against which we act out the



drama of our personal lives."

It may well be that Robertson Davies and the Fellows of Massey College will find the same kind of comfort there which the Victorians discovered in their neo-Gothic villas as they immersed themselves in Sir Walter Scott's romances. It may be that Ron Thom has responded too superficially to Roberston Davies' plea: "Would it not be possible for some of us—a few of you architects and a handful of us ordinary people—to conspire to bring a whisper of magnificence, a shade of light-heartedness and a savour of drama into the setting of our daily lives?" But here, at Massey College, magnificence, light-heartedness and drama have undoubtedly been created with a skill which borders on genius; and the only question the hostile critic may legitimately ask is whether it is proper to achieve these effects by means which so patently appeal, however subtly, to nostalgic reminiscences of a past which is not Canada's, and therefore have an exotic as well as revivalistic flavour.

Much criticism of this nature could, I think, be validly countered by claiming that there is nothing very wrong with using traditional forms when building in traditional materials, and since this building is constructed of brick and limestone, it could reasonably be urged that the detailing is perfectly legitimate. However, before discussing this aspect of the design (which relates more to the validity of the structural system than to the problem immediately under consideration) I should prefer to deal with the other criticism which has been levelled against the building, namely that it is reminiscent, in its forms and ornamentation, of the early architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright. In other words, it is to be condemned because it seemingly indulges in what Nikolaus Pevsner has recently called "The Return to Historicism"; i.e., the imitation of a style authentic only in the first decade of the present century.

Does Massey College set Canadian architecture back fifty years, as one critic has suggested? The answer can indeed be in the affirmative; but only if one regards architectural style as comparable to fashions in clothes, whereby the nature of architecture changes every spring. If one considers that Frank Lloyd Wright was one of the pioneers of modern architecture, and that he had already reached maturity by, say, 1903, then it is difficult to see why the forms he was using in 1913 should cease to be valid in certain circumstances today. The operative phrase here, of course, is "in certain circumstances;" since clearly, the forms Wright used so successfully in Midway Gardens are obviously not applicable to every circumstance. But it may reasonably be argued that Massey College is precisely a circumstance in which they *are* applicable. The building is surrounded by neo-Gothic masonry and brick buildings of various periods with which it now harmonizes. The geometry of the composition seems peculiarly-suitable for, and in comformity with, the disposition of the accomodation. The general atmosphere created by these forms seems to combine with singular felicity to create both the dignity of an academic building and the comfort and intimacy of residential accomodation. Thus of all the works created by the so-called "Form-Givers" of modern architecture since modern architecture first assumed its definitive character fifty years ago, it can hardly be denied that, from the point of view of what Robertson Davies has called "magnificence, light-heartedness and drama," no idiom could be more suitable than that which has actually been chosen, and executed with such masterly originality and verve.

There remains then only one other possible basis of criticism (if we respect the triple criterion of *utilitas, venustas* and *firmitas*), namely the validity of the structural system. Was the architect right to build this three-storey building in load bearing brick and limestone, or should he have ostentatiously called to his aid some of the more daring technological developments which have appeared in the last fifty years? Perhaps a clue to the resolution of this dilemma is furnished by the fact that although the fenestration and spandrels are of carved limestone, the architect originally specified concrete, and only allowed limestone to be substituted when the building contractor demonstrated that it was cheaper.

Now it seems to me that if one "designs" concrete in such a way that limestone can be substituted, there is something inherently wrong with the design itself, and in this respect it is interesting to compare the finished building with one of the competition projects rejected, namely that by John B. Parkin Associates. I do not for one moment intend to question the decision of the jury in rejecting this design, for there seems

no doubt whatsoever that the plan of the winning scheme was better, and that its appearance was more pleasing. But it is noteworthy that Parkin Associates made a deliberate attempt to utilize and exploit contemporary technology in their design, especially in their method of roofing the dining hall, and I would suggest that it is axiomatic that *really great architecture is infused, by the very nature of architecture as both an art and a science, with the urge to utilize and exploit the most up-to-date structural system that the the spatial requirements of a building will permit.*

Massey College, as now completed, is, by virtue of its very excellence, a valuable lesson to architects as to the true nature of architecture, for it illustrates the fallacy of believing too strongly in the fashionableness of today's abstract forms, just as it shows the folly of seeking modernity in novel programmatic requirements alone. Thus it bears striking evidence to support the view that there is no reason why an architect cannot create a completely contemporary building with a traditional program, traditional materials, and geometric forms evolved in an earlier decade. But at the same time it does suggest that genuinely epoch-making architecture can only result through the application of the latest technological processess. There is no reason why every building should be epoch-making. The trustees of the Massey foundation did not ask for an epoch-making building. They asked for a building that would be eminently functional, eminently sturdy, and eminently beautiful, and that is what they got.

Massey College, Toronto
Architects—Thompson, Berwick & Pratt
Architect in Charge—R. J. Thom